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US Vietnam Aim: 'Good Revolution'

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SAIGON, Vietnam—The information gap between Vietnam and the campuses in the United States produces some curious ironies. For instance, the students who are now pursuing with renewed vigor their protest movements against the war in Vietnam do not yet seem to have gotten wind of what appears to be a momentous change in American policy. It is now apparent here that some time this summer President Johnson, in consultation with his key advisers and Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge, decided to acknowledge the reality that Vietnam is in the midst of a violent social revolution, harnessed by communism but not caused by it, and to frame new policy based on that decision.

In effect, a 20 year old United States foreign policy aimed at stabilizing the status quo in Asia was quietly scrapped. The obvious next step was deliberately to offer the Vietnamese an American brand of revolution as an alternative to communism.

Just eight weeks ago, even as the bombing raids and buildup of United States troop strength accelerated, the administration appointed Maj. Gen. Edward G. Lansdale as special assistant to Ambassador Lodge in Saigon. His mission: To execute the new policy of revolution. The appointment was a daring and sweeping departure, for Lansdale is a man of unorthodox views, often at odds with past American policies in Asia. But he is no stranger to Saigon, nor to intrigue. He helped put the late Ngo Dinh Diem in power in Vietnam, working through the central intelligence agency, and as Diem's adviser tried to bring about some sweeping reforms, cut short by coup and assassination. With more success, Lansdale helped the late President Magsaysay of the Philippines win the struggle against the Communist Huks.

Gen. Lansdale

Nor is he a stranger to the idea of revolution and of fighting it with a better revolution.

Figures in Novels

"The Communists have let loose a revolutionary idea in Vietnam," he has written, "and it will not die by being ignored, bombed or smothered by us." The only way to beat it, he argued, was with "a better idea."

The Lansdale formula was previewed in some detail just a year ago in Foreign Affairs quarterly: "A political base would be established," he wrote, by "a statement of political goals founded on principles most cherished by free men. . . . In essense, this is revolutionary warfare, of a piece with the spirit of the British Magna Carta, the French 'liberte, egalite, fraternite' and our own Declaration of Independence."

Heady words. But at the time they were published last October, official United States policy in Vietnam took a much more conservative view. Now Lansdale is back in Saigon with extraordinary instructions from the United States government to try and overthrow the old, established structure of Vietnamese society before the Communists do.

Since a month ago, Saigon's harried booksellers have been unable to meet the feverish demand for two somewhat outdated novels that had been gathering dust on their shelves: "The Ugly American" and "The Quiet American."

The reason for this minor literary revival is that the word has gone around that Lansdale was the inspiration for colorful characters in both these books about the American image in post-colonial southeast Asia.

In "Ugly American," authors Eugene Burdick and William J. Ledorer pictured Lansdale favorably as Col. Hillandale, a harmonica playing hero known in Manila as the Ragtime Kid. He voices the philosophy: "Well, sir . . . every person and every nation has a key which will open their hearts. If you use the right key, you can maneuver any person and any nation any way you want."

Career Revolutionary

That novel's portrait of Lansdale is a sort of guide to how the "good guy" acts overseas. Graham Greene's "Quiet American" much less sympathetically portrays a young CIA agent whose career in Vietnam parallels Lansdale's up to a point. Greene's CIA man is stabbed to death by a Communist terrorist. An American official asks an Englishman, Greene's narrator, "Have you any hunch why they killed him?"

"Yes," the Englishman replies. "They killed him because he was too innocent to live. . . . He had no more notion than any of you what the whole affair's about, and you gave him money and said, 'Go ahead. Win the East for democracy.'"

Emerging from this fictional past 10 years later, the real life Lansdale might be expected to be something of an anti-climax. Surprisingly, he is not.

Now in his early fifties, a tall, wiry man with military brushcut hair and a pencil mustache, Gen. Lansdale has come a long way from the innocent "quiet" CIA man or the Ragtime Kid. But he still looks the part of an authentic confidential agent so well he could probably play himself if his true story were to be filmed.

Though haggard and worn looking after weeks spent surveying the wreckage of Saigon's political landscape, he still packs enough of the enthusiasm to give a listener the impression the United States is just starting along a road, not nearing the end of one, in Vietnam.

As he settles into his job as America's first full fledged career revolutionary, he has at his disposal plenty of dollars, a vast intelligence network and the military backing, where needed, of 150,000 American combat troops. He is responsible only to Ambassador Lodge and President Johnson. His operations are unencumbered by subordination to any of the established American agencies—the military command, civilian aid bureaucracies, or the CIA but his authority cuts across all of them.

Time Running Out

Lansdale is not trying to overthrow a particular government; the replacement of the leadership group at the top is relatively unimportant in his new campaign with social revolution he hopes to achieve. Last

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